

A close-up photograph of a dark, moss-covered rock. Several small, bright green plants with rounded leaves are growing out of the crevices and surface of the rock. The background is a blurred continuation of the mossy terrain.

The Spiritual Exercise of the Sermon on the Mount

DAY ONE:

Revelation and Its Teachability

“He opened His mouth and taught them”

“The centurion said, ‘Lord, I am not worthy for You to come under my roof,
but only say the word, and my servant will be healed.’”

- Gospel of St Matthew 8:8

CLASS INTRODUCTION

This first class begins with the discussion of the “what” and “why” of revelation.

The fact that God reveals Himself to us speaks volumes--not just what He reveals explicitly, but also what He reveals about His nature, His creation, and our place in it by the very fact that He does reveal Himself.

Here, we will touch on the knowability of the existence of God, the goodness and love behind His self-disclosure, His method in revealing Himself to us, and the relationship of reason, revelation, and faith.

More than that, we will also touch on some of the fundamentals of the relationship of Scripture and Tradition. By doing this, we will see their mutual roles in our Faith while we engage with the Lord's teaching in the Sermon on the Mount. As we proceed in our study, we will look at many texts from the Bible as a whole as well as relevant short readings to help us understand how approach the Lord in Scripture in a way that is consistent with the Magisterium of the Church.

This understanding is absolutely essential if we are to see the Sermon on the Mount as the synopsis of the Gospel of the Kingdom that it is.

If possible, please take a little time to be familiar with the readings before class so that our short time on Sunday morning can be used for prayerful examination and discussion.

If you ever have any questions or would like clarification, please email them to

sotmstudy@gmail.com.



OBJECTIVES

Part ONE's objectives are:

- Describe what can and cannot be known about God by human reason
- Explain the role of reason in faith
- Give an example of a “proof” for the existence of God
- Describe why God would want to reveal Himself
- Explain what it is about the human being that makes revelation possible
- Explain the relationship between Scripture and Tradition
- Describe the classical understanding of authority
- Describe the overall structure of the Bible and its basic history
- Explain how Christ is the fulfillment of the “divine legislator”

Today's Scriptural Text Matthew 5: 1-2; 7:28-29

5 1Seeing the crowds, he went up on the mountain, and when he sat down his disciples came to him. 2And he opened his mouth and taught them, saying:

7 28 And when Jesus finished these sayings, the crowds were astonished at his teaching, 29 for he taught them as one who had authority, and not as their scribes.

“But now I am totally forgotten, neglected, despised, and expelled as a king is from his own kingdom and in whose place the most wicked robber has been elected and honored.”

Revelation of Jesus to St Brigit of Sweden I.1

Why begin with teachability of revelation?

Revelation isn't just a teaching or statement or requirement; it's a self-disclosure that is true and is knowable as true.

In all His goodness, our Lord who is Love itself willed not only to create us—to *love us into being*—but also to disclose who He is. Based on this, we as creatures have a much clearer picture of who and what we are, and who/what we are tells us a lot about our Creator.

Revelation therefore is about He Who Is revealing who He is.

Think of **Exodus 3 and the story of the Burning Bush**

What does God tell us about Himself? That He is HE WHO IS. So it's up to human beings to unpack what that means in light of everything else He reveals about Himself in all the various ways that He does reveal Himself—both naturally and supernaturally!

ASIDE: When thinking about God's revelation of Himself, remember that His Name tells us so much. While we say "Yahweh" in English, the Hebrew YHWH has no written vowels (because it is a Semitic language), so the "a" and "e" in Yahweh are really a "best guess." More than that, when we read the Old Testament, and see the word LORD (all capitals), this indicates that in the Hebrew text, the name YHWH is written. Judaism treats the Holy Name--the Tetragrammaton--as so holy that it should never be uttered.

So, when you hear in a Scripture reading the speaker say "the LORD your God, what the text says is "YHWH your God."

Exodus 3

Now Moses was pasturing the flock of Jethro his father-in-law, the priest of Midian; and he led the flock to the [a]west side of the wilderness and came to Horeb, the mountain of God.

2 The angel of the LORD appeared to him in a blazing fire from the midst of [b]a bush; and he looked, and behold, the bush was burning with fire, yet the bush was not consumed.

3 So Moses said, "I must turn aside now and see this marvelous sight, why the bush is not burned up."

4 When the LORD saw that he turned aside to look, God called to him from the midst of the bush and said, "Moses, Moses!" And he said, "Here I am."

5 Then He said, "Do not come near here; remove your sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground."

6 He said also, "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." Then Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God.

7 The LORD said, "I have surely seen the affliction of My people who are in Egypt, and have given heed to their cry because of their taskmasters, for I am aware of their sufferings.

8 So I have come down to deliver them from the power of the Egyptians, and to bring them up from that land to a good and spacious land, to a land flowing with milk and honey, to the place of the Canaanite and the Hittite and the Amorite and the Perizzite and the Hivite and the Jebusite.

9 Now, behold, the cry of the sons of Israel has come to Me; furthermore, I have seen the oppression with which the Egyptians are oppressing them.

10 Therefore, come now, and I will send you to Pharaoh, so that you may bring My people, the sons of Israel, out of Egypt."

11 But Moses said to God, "Who am I, that I should go to Pharaoh, and that I should bring the sons of Israel out of Egypt?"

12 And He said, "Certainly I will be with you, and this shall be the sign to you that it is I who have sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall [f]worship God at this mountain."

13 Then Moses said to God, "Behold, I am going to the sons of Israel, and I will say to them, 'The God of your fathers has sent me to you.' Now they may say to me, 'What is His name?' What shall I say to them?"

14 God said to Moses, "I AM WHO I AM"; and He said, "Thus you shall say to the sons of Israel, 'I AM has sent me to you.'"

15 God, furthermore, said to Moses, "Thus you shall say to the sons of Israel, 'The LORD, the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you.' This is My name forever, and this is My memorial-name to all generations.

INTRODUCING: the Sermon on the Mount

The Sermon begins:

1Seeing the crowds, he went up on the mountain, and when he sat down his disciples came to him.

2And he opened his mouth and taught them, saying:

The Lord Jesus goes up the mountain and the disciples draw near to hear His very words from His own mouth.

This fact alone is important: the two greatest “teachers” of Western civilization—Jesus and Socrates--never wrote a single book.

Why not?

In addition, the spoken word is such that it carries a power different than that of the printed word for any number of reasons. Here are three:

First, it bears something intimate, something immediate, that is lacking in the printed word. It isn't as polished nor practiced as the written word.

Second, receiving the spoken word allows the hearer to hear inflection, timbre, pitch, and all else that conveys something that the written word simply cannot.

Third, language bears a complexity that requires intellect to receive, understand, and reciprocate.

“So faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes by the preaching of Christ.”

-Romans 10:17

GOSPEL OF JOHN 1:1-18

‘In the beginning was the **Word**, and the **Word** was with God, and the **Word** was God.

2 He was in the beginning with God.

3 All things came into being through Him, and apart from Him nothing came into being that has come into being.

4 In Him was life, and the life was the Light of men.

5 The Light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not comprehend it.

6 There came a man sent from God, whose name was John.

7 He came as a witness, to testify about the Light, so that all might believe through him.

8 He was not the Light, but he came to testify about the Light.

9 There was the true Light which, coming into the world, enlightens every man.

10 He was in the world, and the world was made through Him, and the world did not know Him.

11 He came to His own, and those who were His own did not receive Him.

12 But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, even to those who believe in His name,

13 who were [i]born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.

14 And the **Word** became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we saw His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth.

15 John testified about Him and cried out, saying, “This was He of whom I said, ‘He who comes after me has a higher rank than I, for He existed before me.’”

16 For of His fullness we have all received, and grace upon grace.

17 For the Law was given through Moses; grace and truth were realized through Jesus Christ.

18 No one has seen God at any time; the only begotten God who is in the bosom of the Father, He has made Him known.”

QUESTION: What then might this have to do with the Prologue to the Gospel of St John referring to Jesus--the Second Person of the Trinity--as the “Word of God?”

Proving God's Existence

If you are sitting here and reading this, you probably don't need much proof that God exists. Let's see about demonstrating it anyway.

Everything that is created was created through the Word, so everything that is created bears some evidence of its Creator. This is a fundamental principle of both philosophy and theology: that "the cause is always present in some way in the effect."

This means we can rationally demonstrate that God does in fact exist. Let's take three examples:

DEMONSTRATION BY THE EXPERIENCE OF RED (Adapted from St Augustine)

DEMONSTRATION BY BEING (St Anselm)

DEMONSTRATION BY "THE FIVE WAYS" (St Thomas Aquinas)

from MOTION

from EFFICIENT CAUSE

from NECESSITY

from GRADATION

from GOVERNANCE OF THE WORLD

Ultimately, whether we like it or not, these illustrate that we can and do know that God exists through the natural world, as we will see in Romans 1.

"It was necessary for the salvation of man that certain truths which exceed human reason should be made known to him by divine revelation. Even as regards those truths about God which human reason could have discovered, it was necessary that man should be taught by a divine revelation, because the truth about God such as reason could discover would only be known by a few, and that after a long time, and with an admixture of many errors."-

- St Thomas Aquinas, ST I.1 a1 cor

What does this mean for who and what we are?

Since God reveals Himself in the natural world as well as supernaturally, some things have to be true about us as human beings in order for us to respond to Him.

Traditionally, this component of our nature is our intellect and our will.

My **intellect** is the faculty of knowing (not the faculty of thinking). Man is a knowing thing who comes to know through his senses and capable of abstracting the immaterial from the material (e.g I understand dogginess by observing many dogs). With the intellect, I apprehend the nature of a thing, I judge whether that apprehension is true or false (if it exists or not), and if it is good or not.

With my **will**, I freely choose what I understand through the intellect to be good, and although my will is free, I never ever choose what I know to be not-good. Even bad choices are made for the sake of some perceived good.

In the end, all this means that I am able to apprehend this revelation of God of Himself to human beings, judge its validity and goodness, and choose to accept or reject it.

This is at the heart of the act of faith, hope, and love.

QUESTION: After all this discussion, how obvious is it that God exists? Is it self-evident, or does it require demonstration? Should the “average Joe” anywhere in the world know that there is a God out there?

The nature of revelation gives us the answer...

What's at the heart of revelation?

We tend to think of revelation as some divinely enforced rule book instead of seeing it as a sort of first love-letter: a beginning of the courtship between God and Man. God therefore is required (if we hold to our analogy) to self-disclose something about Himself beyond what can be known naturally by us in the world around us.

EXAMPLE: THE LOVE LETTER

EXAMPLE: DATA AND METADATA

But we must remember: God's self-disclosure is completely rational, even if "supra-rational. In other words, He cannot contradict reason since He is the author of reason.

We cannot think of revelation of God as separate from God, like a picture we take with an iPhone bares only a slight resemblance to the actual subject.

Ultimately, we come to know God—not just concepts of God but God Himself—through His revelation.

Language and Revelation

This means that most of modern philosophy cannot deal with issues related to revelation and faith

EXAMPLE: The problem of Kant and concepts

So, since we can and do know God and not just our own concepts of God, then we can talk about Him. But what kind of language?

UNIVOCAL
EQUIVOCAL
ANALOGOUS

Think of who God is: “God is my rock” vs “God is my ham sandwich.”

Think of the example of FATHERHOOD. Some think that since we have fathers, then God is like the “great father in the sky.” Instead, God is the true father, and all human fatherhood is analogous to his fatherhood.

The same thing applies to MASCULINITY and FEMININITY.

Athens to Jerusalem and Back?

Through His revelation, God teaches us what we need to know about Him as well as what it is about Him that is worth knowing in the first place.

Through Nature:

- Order
- Truth
- Goodness
- Beauty
- Oneness

Through supernatural revelation:

- Trinity
- Grace
- Sacraments
- Church

When we think of Tertullian's question "What does Athens have to do with Jerusalem?" (meaning, what does philosophy or reason have to do with faith), we can now see that reason serves faith as its handmaiden, or servant.

"Theology can in a sense depend upon the philosophical sciences, in order to make its teaching clearer. For it accepts its principles not from other sciences, but immediately from God, by revelation. Therefore it does not depend upon others sciences [as higher], but makes use of them as of a lesser, and as handmaidens..."

- St Thomas Aquinas, ST I.1 a5, ad 2.

Faith is Knowledge, Not Blindness !

So we understand that faith is reasonable. That means that there is no such thing in the Church as “blind faith.”

Faith is an act of knowing based on reliable authority.

EXAMPLE: WHAT IS THE NAME OF YOUR GREAT-GRANDMOTHER?
HOW DO YOU KNOW?

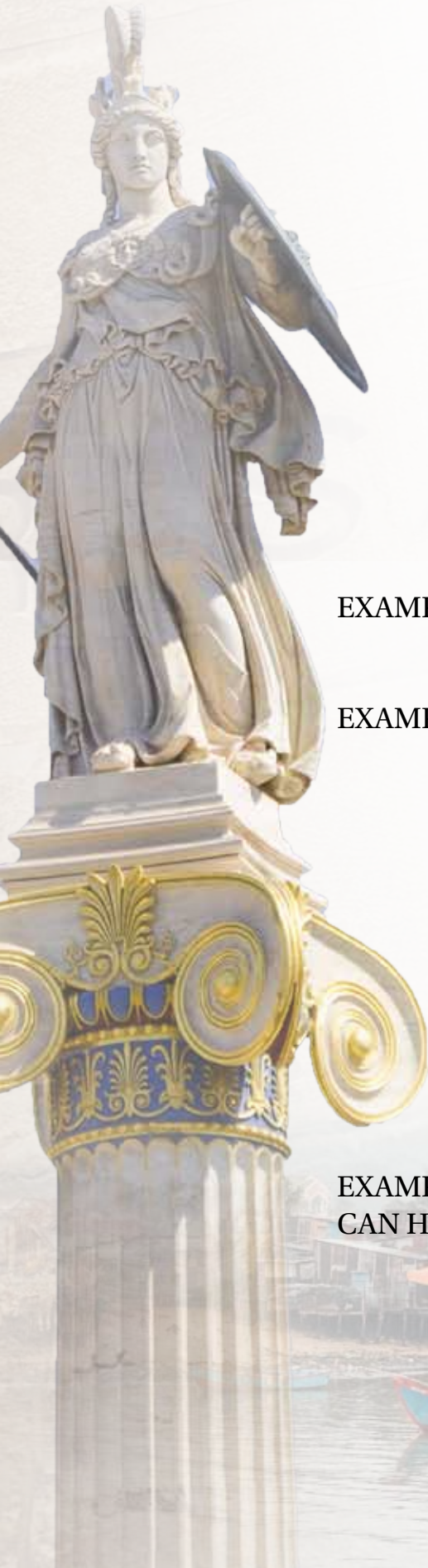
EXAMPLE: A FIRST BLIND DATE

Likewise, we take God at His word when He reveals Himself, and we therefore must take the Church at its word when it assures us that what we believe is in fact what He reveals.

We as Catholics do not accept blindly what is absurd or contradicts reason.

EXAMPLE: IF GOD IS ALL-POWERFUL AND CAN DO ANYTHING,
CAN HE MAKE A ROCK SO HEAVEY THAT HE CAN'T PICK IT UP?

Question: if God revealed that $2+2=5$, would we believe it?



The Distinction Between Protestants and the Rest of Us

Catholics (and the Orthodox to a degree) rely on the teaching authority of the Church to steer us into proper belief about what is true and what is not true. Protestantism has no such assurance. For non-denominational Protestants in particular, this amounts to teaching by one's own authority without regard to 2000 years of confirmation.

EXAMPLE: WISHFUL GENEALOGY


EXAMPLE: DISPENSATIONALISM

EXAMPLE: THE MODERN INVENTION OF THE RAPTURE

This is one of the great problems of **ECUMENISM**: what is truth and how do we know it? In dialogue with Protestants, we cannot just hope to agree on point of discussion. We must see where we differ so that we can understand exactly where the truth is. Otherwise, we fall into a sentimental pit devoid of the "divine content."

Ultimately, we as Roman Catholics must be 100% clear what we believe if we are to engage in evangelization, much less ecumenism. Otherwise, we are trying to give to drink from a cup that is empty, or worse, corrupt.

For a Catholic, God is immanently knowable: in His Church, in its Magisterium, in its Sacraments, in its hierarchy, in its past, in its future, etc.



This truth is so difficult for modern men and women that it bears repeating: we know God through His revelation and not just doctrines about God.

More than that, doctrines themselves are real, valid, and unchangeable. They are not mythical nor legendary nor subject to change.

QUESTION: What about “new” doctrines?

Three “Layers” of Knowledge of God (and other things)

In issues of faith and morals, there are in reality “THREE layers of knowability:”

1. What can only be known through revelation (e.g God is Trinity)
2. What we can always know through unaided human reason (that 2 does not equal 3)
3. What we should have known by unaided human reason but didn’t put together until it was revealed. (that God is Being itself)

The question is: how do we know for sure which of these applies to anything we know about God? Isn’t this getting too complicated?

Actually, Romans 1 brings knowledge and revelation home for us.



Romans 1:18-23

18 For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men who suppress the truth in unrighteousness,

19 because that which is known about God is evident within them; for God made it evident to them.

20 For since the creation of the world, His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made, so that they are without excuse.

21 For even though they knew God, they did not honor Him as God or give thanks, but they became futile in their speculations, and their foolish heart was darkened.

22 Professing to be wise, they became fools,

23 and exchanged the glory of the incorruptible God for an image in the form of corruptible man and of birds and four-footed animals and [o]crawling creatures.

What does all this mean for us? What is it important enough for us to spend time on?

Revelation and Faith

We as human beings have intellect and will, which are given to us as creatures *in imago Dei*.

It is therefore given to us to understand ourselves and the world around us and to then choose the good based on a true understanding.

We can know what is true and choose what is good with plain ol' human reason, unaided by special revelation from God. This is where philosophy, science, mathematics, and the liberal arts come in.

We can know that God exists just by looking around at the cosmos and at ourselves. Atheism therefore has no justification.

Some things are outside our intellect's competence--such as who God is in Himself and our supernatural end as human beings. For these, we need His revelation.

Faith as a human act is the believing of something as true based on the testimony of another.

The supernatural virtue of faith is believing what God reveals about Himself through His special instruments. This is the faith required of us by the Lord.





Tying It All Together in the Sermon on the Mount

Christ's revealing His teaching: it's not good citizenship—the Sermon is the revealing by God of Who He is and how to please Him.

In the Sermon on the Mount, the Second Person of the Trinity Incarnate--that is, Jesus Christ--reveals the Gospel of the Kingdom. In this Gospel as epitomized in the Sermon,

He declares happiness to be the crux of human life.

He reminds us that Natural Law is written in our hearts--things we already know from human reason (or should know) to which we are always morally bound.

He talks about the perfection of Man as being the perfection of love.

He not only invites, but also expects, complete confidence in Divine Providence.

And he gives the gravest warning against false prophets who will attempt to lead us astray, not just from what has been revealed in this Gospel but from what human reason already knows.

In the end, we truly do not have excuse not to hear, not to believe, not to embrace. The Blessed Lord reveals all this and calls on our intellect to see it and our will to choose it.

Authority vs Commentary

The Sermon on the Mount concludes with two verses that seal our discussion of revelation and its teachability:

“And when Jesus finished these sayings, the crowds were astonished at his teaching, for he taught them as one who had authority, and not as their scribes.”

That’s what makes the conclusion that He speaks as one with authority so strong: He’s not a commentator, but instead the original “thinker.” He is the Divine Legislator. He is the Word.

The Bible and its place in the Tradition:

What unifies all Church teaching and Church practice is the primacy of the Tradition.

When we hear this word, we tend to confuse it with human traditions, which to modern ears sounds like simple cultural practices.

The Tradition (with a capital T) is “that which is handed down,” in this case what is handed down by the Apostles and guaranteed by the Holy Spirit. This authority of Tradition is secured in an infallible Magisterium that can never solemnly proclaim false teaching (heresy) nor propagate harmful practice and discipline.

And in matters of Faith and morals, “creativity” is always the opposite of Tradition.

All teaching that flows to us in the Tradition that is secured by the Magisterium comes from the Blessed Lord or what was given us from the Apostles who received directly from Him.

So where does the Bible fit into all of this?

Most of us follow the Protestant idea that the Bible is the ultimate authority in all spiritual matters, but it’s not quite that simple. The Bible is infallible, but how it is interpreted depends upon the Tradition. In fact, it is the Tradition that tells us which books are in the Bible. It is the Tradition that tells us the Bible is infallible. It is the Tradition that places itself under the authority of the Bible and asserts the Bible to be the “measuring rod” of the Tradition.

Getting to Know the Bible

The Bible is actually not one book but a collection of books and other writings, all of which are divinely inspired.

The Bible was written over about 1500 years.

The two main textual sources of the Old Testament are the Greek Septuagint and the Hebrew Masoretic Text.

The Bible is composed of two main parts: the Old Testament and New Testament

The Old Testament is divided into three parts: the Law, the Prophets, and the Writings.

Certain books of the Old Testament are disputed by Protestants--these are what we call the "Deuterocanonical" books.

The New Testament is divided into four parts: the Gospels, the Acts of the Apostles, 21 letters, and the Revelation to St John.

The New Testament does not replace the Old Testament; it fulfills it.

By the 4th Century AD, the New Testament canon was firmly established, but it was not until the Council of Trent in the 16th Century--on the heels of the Protestant Revolution--that the entire Biblical canon was set.

In many of the Eastern non-Chalcedonian churches, many other apocryphal books are included in the Old Testament that are flatly rejected by the Western and Orthodox churches.

A large, leafy tree stands in the center of the frame, its branches spreading out. The background is a soft, misty landscape with other trees visible in the distance. The overall tone is quiet and contemplative.

The Work of the Spiritual Exercise

As we move forward, many things we read will inspire us and push us to greater holiness. In fact, we may well feel warm feelings of consolation as we feel the Holy Spirit moving us.

Yet, we will each be confronted by at least something in the Sermon that will convict us at best, and perhaps anger us at worst. That's what God's pedagogy, or training does: it points the way, and it gives sustenance, but it points out in glaring detail our defects.

This means that if you or I are challenged by the text, then we need to be sincere enough in our faith in Christ to really examine ourselves as it pertains to that challenge. Throughout the Gospel's events, we continually see both the Pharisee, the crowds, and even the disciples confronted by the Lord's correction and undoing of what they were sure was life and how to live it.

We are no better than the disciples, so we should expect the text's correction of at least some things in our lives.

This is the power of the "spiritual exercise."



Coming up Next:

Part Two: The Law of Happiness

In Part Two, we will dive into the most famous part of the Sermon on the Mount--the Beatitudes. In that lesson, we will examine: how God made human beings for the sake of being happy, how God provides the means to being happy, and how the participation in the Lord's divine life is the heart and soul of the only real happiness that is possible.

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